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TAGS: PREL PGOV KDEM VE CO

SUBJECT: VENEZUELA: CHAVEZ STEPS UP CRITICISM OF U.S. AND COLOMBIA

Classified By: ACTING POLITICAL COUNSELOR DARNALL STEUART FOR REASON 1.
4 (B)

¶1. (SBU) During his address to the UNASUR summit on August 10, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez said that "the winds of war were beginning to blow" in Latin America, and charged that the proposed US-Colombia defense agreement could cause a war in the region. In an interview earlier in the day with the Ecuadorian government's digital journal El Ciudadano, Chavez reportedly said that the proposed Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) would lead to "imperialist Yankee provocations against Ecuador, Venezuela, and other countries from Colombia." Chavez characterized as "laughable" President Obama's August 7 statement that the DCA will not lead to the installation of US military bases and should not be seen as a threat to the region. However, Chavez said he gave the President the benefit of the doubt because, "just like with the Honduras coup," he may not know what is going on. Chavez said "I have my doubts as to who is in charge as it does not seem that Obama is leading the United States. It could be that they are deceiving or manipulating him."

RATCHETING UP THE RHETORIC

¶2. (SBU) Chavez is continuing his criticism of the US and Colombia and reportedly told journalists upon arriving in Quito late on the evening of August 9 that President Uribe was afraid to face his regional counterparts. He called on Uribe to explain the "treason" he has committed by agreeing to deepen cooperation with the US, and said he would invite his counterparts gathered in Quito to "raise their voice" against Colombia. Chavez charged that "the presence of Yankees in Colombia is a threat against Venezuela," and said the cancellation of the DCA was the only way to overcome the crisis between the two countries. Chavez paraphrased earlier comments from Fidel Castro and claimed that Uribe had, "sunk seven daggers in the heart of America, of South America, of UNASUR."

¶3. (SBU) Chavez also used his "Alo Presidente" television broadcast on August 9 to attack Colombia and the US, and called for an end to the Venezuelan fuel subsidy for Colombia. (Note. Under an agreement signed August 17, 2008, Venezuela sells approximately 4.5 million gallons of subsidized gasoline each month (150,000 gallons per day) to Colombia's Norte de Santander department to combat fuel smuggling. The agreement is scheduled to expire on August 17, 2009.) Chavez said that because of its plans to deepen defense cooperation with the US, Colombia no longer merited preferential pricing and should pay for the gasoline "at market price." He said that even though he had ordered the

return of Venezuela's ambassador to Colombia, relations between the countries remained "frozen." Chavez also accused his neighbor of conducting a military incursion inside Venezuelan territory, but did not say when this had occurred.

Chavez claimed he had been informed that Colombian soldiers had crossed the Orinoco River border in a small boat, although he said the boat had gone by the time Venezuelan troops arrived to check. Chavez called the supposed act a "provocation caused by the Yankees there, the Yankees that have started to command Colombian military forces." The Colombian government released a statement August 9 denying that their forces had crossed the Orinoco or entered into Venezuelan territory.

COMMENT

¶4. (C) Chavez's accusation that Colombian soldiers crossed into Venezuelan territory, and his criticism on August 10 of the recent arrest by Colombian military forces of eleven Ecuadorian soldiers who had illegally crossed the border, serve his efforts to make the implausible leap from increased U.S. access to Colombian bases to U.S. support for imagined future military actions against Venezuela.

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